

Spotlight: Changes in participation rates for men and women in Australia

Long term trends in the participation rate

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Source: [Labour Force, Australia, February 2025](#)

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Introduction

Increasing labour force participation has been a feature of the Australian labour market in recent years, following the major disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participation rate, which measures the percentage of the population who were either employed or unemployed, reached a new record high in late 2024 and was much higher for women.

Between December 2019 and December 2024, the participation rate in Australia rose from 65.7% to 67.0% (1.3 ppts).

[Most OECD countries \(https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/insights/statistical-releases/2025/1/labour-market-situation-oecd-01-2025.pdf\)](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/insights/statistical-releases/2025/1/labour-market-situation-oecd-01-2025.pdf), including Australia, have seen historically high levels of participation in either 2023 or 2024. This is in contrast to the many forecasts and projections over recent decades of declining participation rates.

In addition to considering how much participation changes reflect structural or cyclical factors in society and the economy, it is also important and useful to consider the extent to which they occur at different times during the year when [looking at month-to-month changes in seasonally adjusted data \(/articles/seasonal-adjustment-and-changing-seasonality-labour-force-statistics-january-2025\)](#).

This spotlight therefore uses trend data, where it is available, as the best measure of change in the labour market over time. Annual averages have been used for analysis of detailed original data by age and sex.

Participation rate by sex

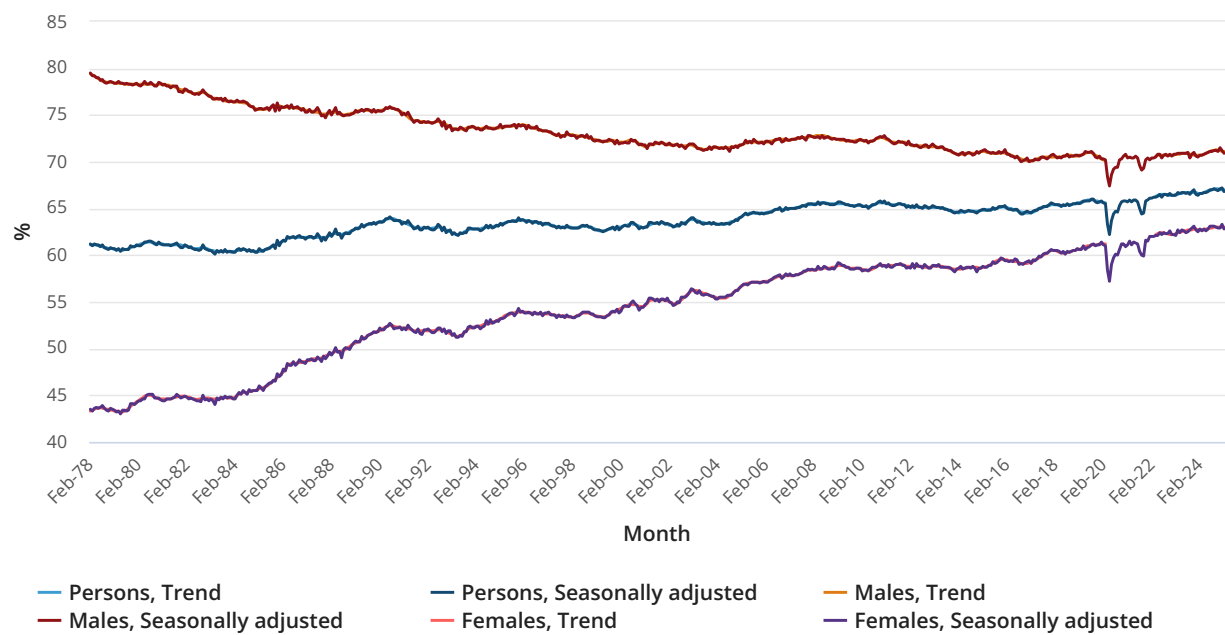
The participation rate in Australia rose from 61.2% to 63.0% for women (1.8 ppts), and 70.4% to 71.2% for men (0.8

ppts), between December 2019 and December 2024.

As Graph 1 shows, these recent changes follow on from decades of longer-term trends of increasing female participation and reducing male participation. Some of the decrease in male participation reflects ageing in the population, with an increasing share of people aged 65 and over.

Together, these trends have contributed to a narrowing in the gap between male and female participation rates, from around 36 percentage points in February 1978, down to around 8 percentage points in December 2024.

Graph 1. Participation rates by Sex, People aged 15 years and over



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Table 1

Note: The large month-to-month changes in Trend data during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have been excluded from this graph.

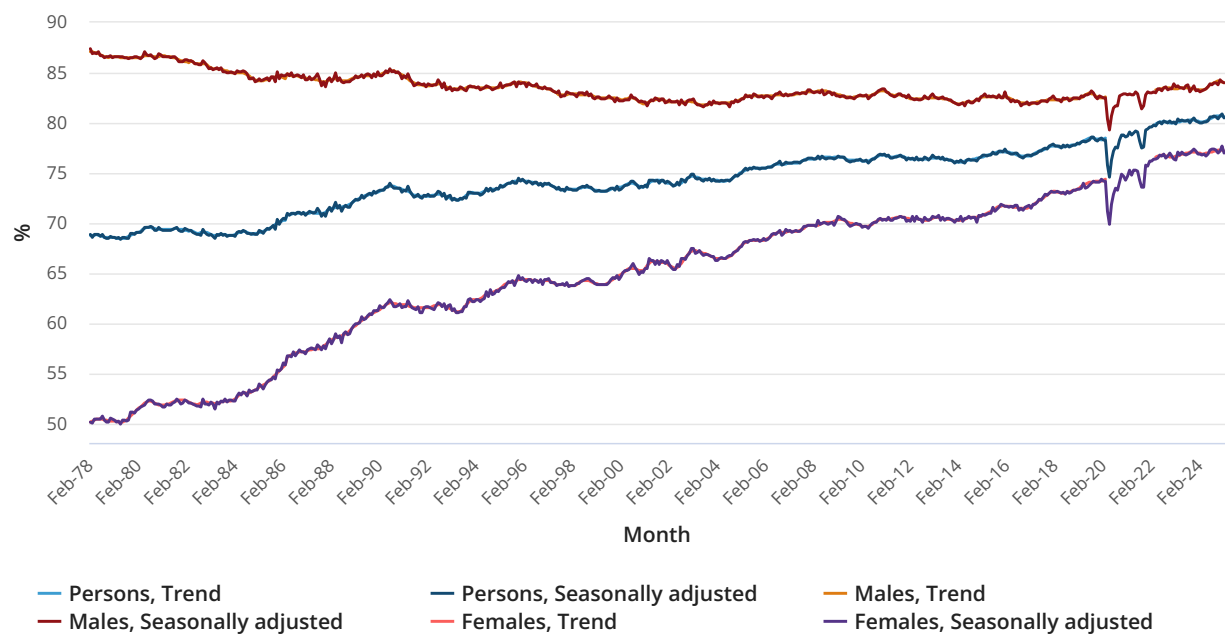
Participation rate for the 'working age population' (15-64 year olds)

The change in the participation rate for people aged between 15-64, the population labour economists and demographers sometimes describe as the 'working age population', has been even more pronounced.

Between December 2019 and December 2024, this measure rose from 78.4% to 80.7% (2.3 ppts); 74.2% to 77.3% for women (3.1 ppts), and 82.5% to 84.1% for men (1.6 ppts), in trend terms.

Increasing female participation in the working age population has been particularly noteworthy, having increased from 50.2% in February 1978 to 77.3% in December 2024. This has seen the gap between male and female participation rates narrow from around 37 percentage points in February 1978, down to around 7 percentage points in December 2024.

Graph 2. Participation rates by Sex, 15-64 year olds



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Table 18

Note: The large month-to-month changes in Trend data during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have been excluded from this graph.

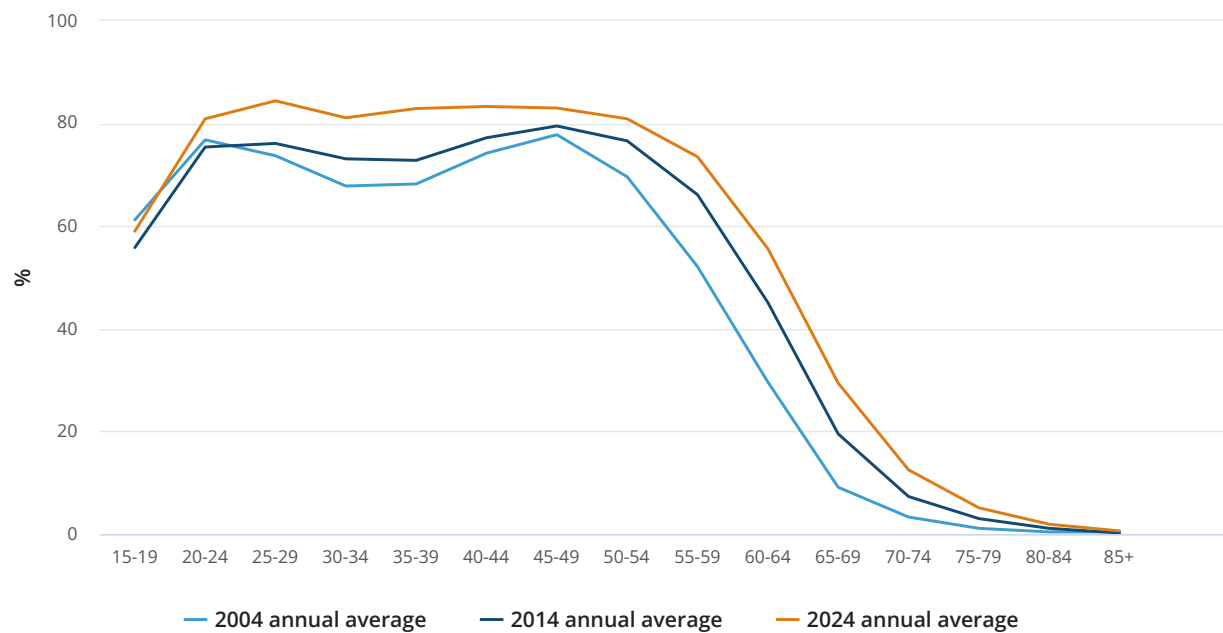
Participation rate by age groups

In understanding changes in participation over time, it is useful to look at the contribution of different age groups to changes in the headline rate. They provide important context for considering the range of economic and social factors that influence participation, both in terms of opportunities and challenges, and how these are changing over time.

Just as there has been a larger change in the headline participation rate for women than men, the same is also true for participation by age, across the stages of people's lives.

For women there has been an increase in participation across all age groups, with a change in the shape of the age profile of their participation rates. Graph 3, which contrasts the participation rates during 2024 with a decade and two decades earlier, shows a general increase, with a smaller and shorter drop during the period most commonly associated with having children.

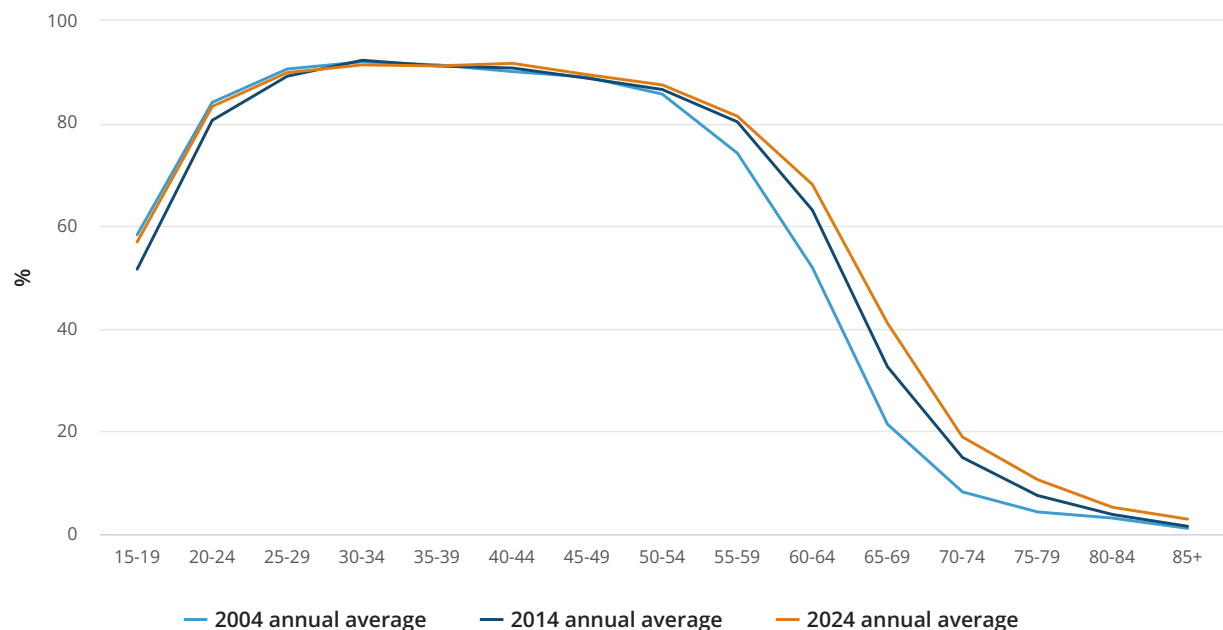
Graph 3. Female participation rates by age in years, Original



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Pivot table LM9

In contrast to the changes seen for women, most of the longer-term changes for men have been around higher rates of participation in older age groups and later in life.

Graph 4. Male participation rates by age in years, Original



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Pivot table LM9

Recent changes in the Participation rate

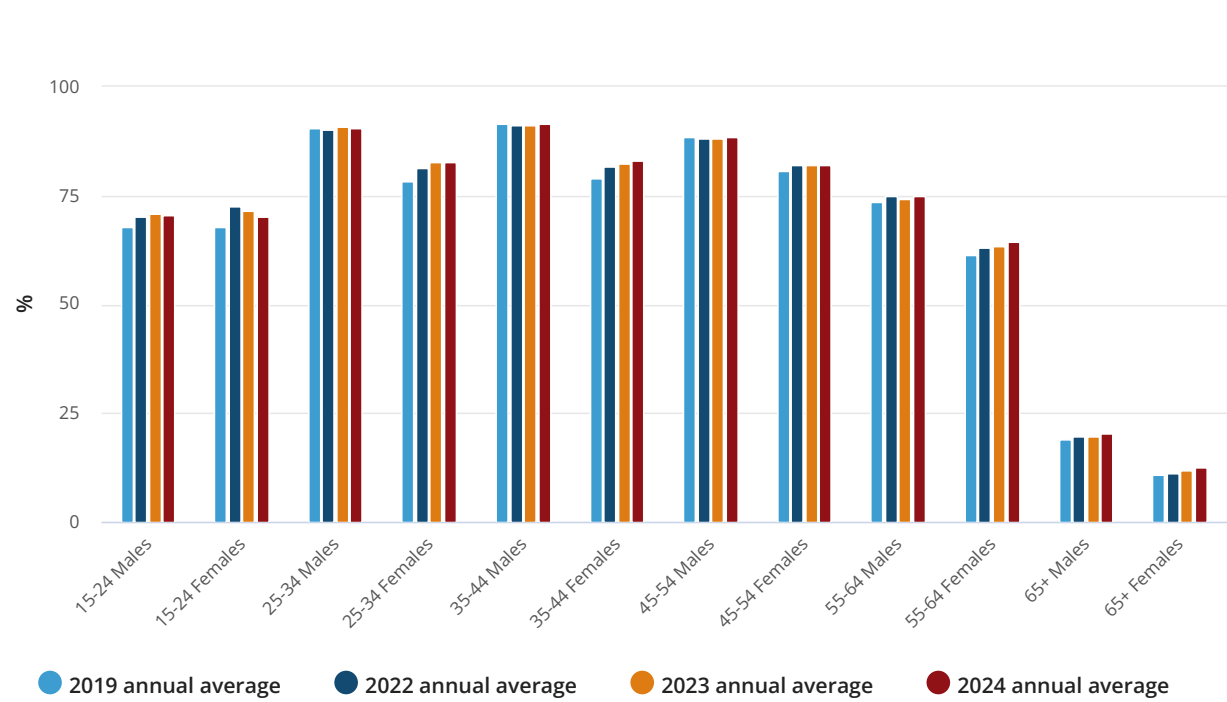
Recent changes in participation by age are also evident looking over a relatively short period of time.

Graph 5 provides a further comparison of participation rates for men and women, based on the most commonly used and broader age ranges. In addition, 2019 participation rates have been included as a pre-pandemic comparison. Both 2020 and 2021 have been excluded, as they both include considerable impacts to participation during the pandemic.

This highlights the recent increase in participation by women across all age groups. It also highlights increase for people aged 55 years and older.

There are a range of factors that have contributed to these changes in participation. Some of these are structural, such as long-term increasing female participation and people working later in life, and others that are tied to cyclical factors, such as the relative tightness of the labour market in recent years and cost of living pressures.

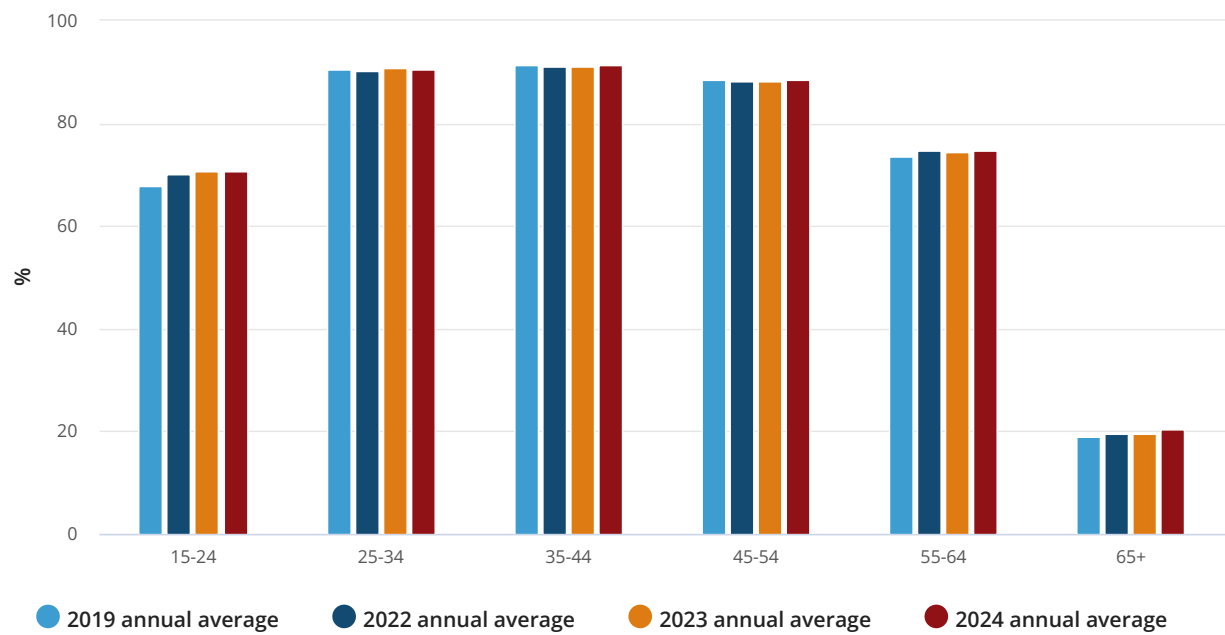
Graph 5. Age participation rates by Sex, Original



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Pivot table LM9

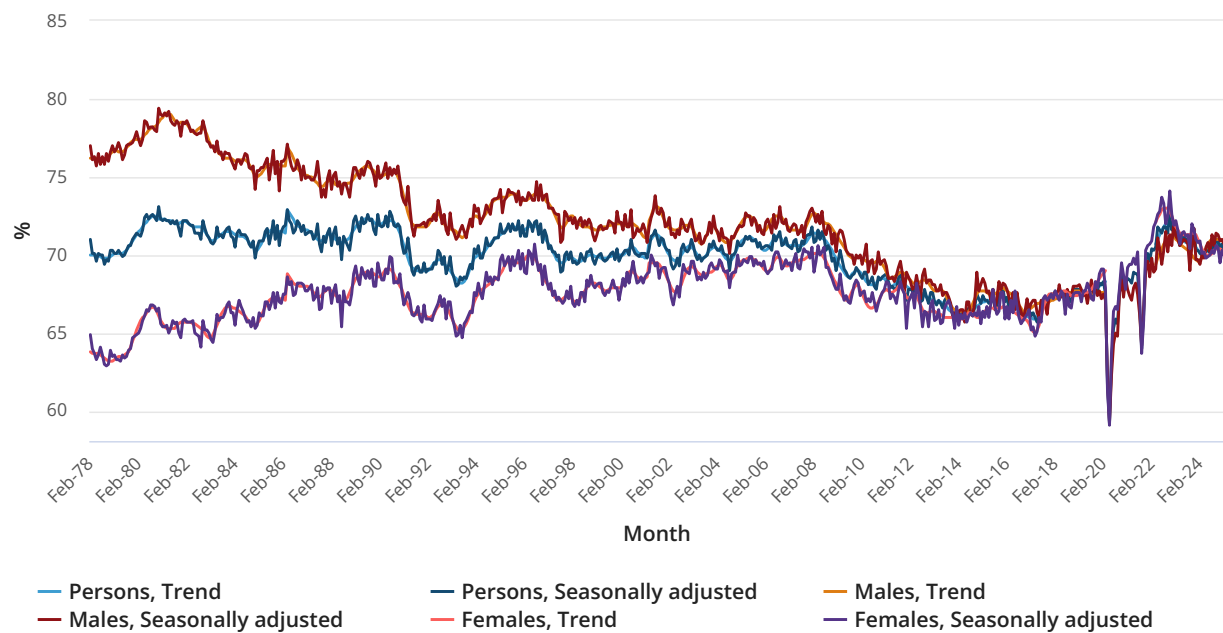
Graph 6. Age participation rates for females, Original

Graph 7. Age participation rates for males, Original



While increasing participation in the older age groups has been a longstanding trend, changes in youth participation over time has been much more varied. Recent youth participation rates are now back around where they were just prior to the onset of the Global Financial Crisis, in 2008-09, having been consistently below this level for 15 years.

Graph 8. Participation rates by Sex, 15-24 year olds



Source: Labour Force, Australia, Table 13

Note: The large month-to-month changes in Trend data during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have been excluded from this graph.

How to contact us with questions or feedback

The ABS always seeks to provide guidance and advice to users to assist in interpreting changes in Labour Force data over time.

If you have a question or have any feedback on additional explanatory that would be useful, please contact us at labour.statistics@abs.gov.au (<mailto:labour.statistics@abs.gov.au>).